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ABSTRACT

It is difficult to strike a balance between the demands placed on graduate students and those placed on graduate forensics assistants. The combination of duties as Graduate Forensics Assistants (GFAs)--baby sitters, confidants, teachers, travel agents, administrators, clerical workers, psychologists, proofreaders, authority figures, and finally, coaches--with those of graduate study devours so much time that many GFAs are burned out even before taking their first professional coaching position. Many excellent potential coaches are thus being lost because as graduate students these coaches were discouraged from becoming fulltime coaches as a result of the same conditions that drive experienced coaches out of the activity. GFAs should expect to spend large amounts of time helping students learn the skills necessary to compete, but not at the expense of his/her graduate studies. GFAs should have time to learn to be good classroom teachers and sound scholars. There are several ways to prevent the problem of GFA burnout: (1) shorten the competitive season; (2) make the tournament schedules more humane; (3) offer GFAs half-time appointments so that he/she could teach half-time; and (4) recognize and appreciate the amount of work put forth by the GFAs. The future of forensics is based upon the skills of today's GFAs, and the activity cannot survive if new coaches are not encouraged to remain active in the forensic community. (PRA)

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# Balancing the Scholarship Demands of Forensics and Graduate Study

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Balancing the Scholarship Demands of Forensics and Graduate Study

The experiences I have gained as a graduate forensic assistant have been invaluable. The growth I have experienced as an educator has been tremendous, and I have met many people who have contributed to my development as a coach and as a person. However, along with these benefits are many trade-offs. The time commitment needed to be a successful forensics coach is large, and the work load is immense. Every moment spent on forensics is time spent away from one's program of graduate study. Because of the importance of graduate students' scholarship, it is necessary to try to strike a balance between the demands of forensics and graduate study. The purpose of my paper is to examine the demands placed on graduate forensic assistants, the demands placed on graduate students, how those demands conflict, and how best to strike a balance between the two competing interests.

## The Demands of Forensics

The duties of graduate forensic assistants (GFA's) are many and varied. GFA's must act as baby-sitters, confidants, teachers, travel agents, administrators, clerical workers, psychologists, proofreaders, authority figures, and finally, coaches. Anyone who has spent time as a forensic's educator will testify that each week he/she must spend time in each of the roles I have cited. Each of these duties takes time. I have found that I often spend less time coaching students than I do participating in other roles.

I believe that the time spent "on the job" by GFA's is much

larger than that of a normal teaching assistant. For example, before becoming a GFA I spent a year as a traditional teaching assistant, teaching the Introduction to Public Speaking course. I spent five hours a week in class, lecturing one-third of the time, and watching speeches for the remaining two-thirds of the class. I spent another five to ten hours a week grading speeches or preparing lectures. Finally, I spent approximately five hours a week meeting with students outside of class. My discussions with other teaching assistants confirmed that 15-20 hours a week is the maximum most graduate student spent teaching a class.

Working as a GFA, on the other hand, regularly demands twice as many hours. Though a non-tournament week probably demands about 20 hours a week, a week in which we attend a tournament demands much more. For example, in two weeks the University of Washington forensics team will attend a tournament at Linfield College. I will probably watch a minimum of two practice debates the week before the tournament, each taking about two and one-half hours. I will also watch four or five individual event speeches, each taking about one hour. I will also need to prepare administratively for the tournament--preparing and faxing our entry, reserving hotel rooms, reserving and picking up a van, and organizing our departure. These duties will require at least two hours of work. I will also meet with students individually for five hours total. Thus, before even leaving for the tournament, I will have spent at least sixteen hours working on forensics. We will leave for the tournament Friday morning, and

return Sunday night. Excluding six hours a day for sleep (a generous allowance), I will be working at least forty-five hours. During those forty-five hours I will be driving the van, watching debate and speech rounds, coaching students, organizing meals, and counseling students about how to deal with their losses. Adding this time to the hours spent on pre-tournament preparation, I will spend between 60 and 70 hours on forensics that week. I'm already tired just thinking about it.

Since we attend 10-15 tournaments per year (which is small compared to some schools), there will be 10-15 weeks that I spend three to four times as much time working than a normal TA, for about the same salary. It becomes easy to understand why GFA's have trouble keeping up with the demands of graduate scholarship.

## The Demands of Graduate Study

The demands of graduate study are well known to all present and former students, but I will briefly review the time commitments required. The time spent working on graduate studies often takes between 30 and 40 hours per week. Graduate students spend at least six hours a week in class, and twice that amount working on coursework outside of the classroom. Students must also spend time preparing a program of study, meeting with professors, doing outside writing, and building a vitae that will be attractive to potential employers. It doesn't take a math expert to figure out that 30-40 hours spent on studies and 60-70 hours spent on forensics equals little time spent with family,

friends, and hobbies.

Besides limiting the amount of time a student has to him or herself, the time demands also cause other harms. Most students find it very difficult to maintain the type of schedule I have outlined. As a result, GFA's often find it necessary to cut back in some areas. Realistically, most choose to cut back on the amount of time spent on graduate studies. The result of these cutbacks are a diminished quality of work, which leads to pressure from professors. Professors also form negative opinions about forensics because they see good students cutting back on their work. Finally, decreased academic performance can make it difficult for GFA's to maintain their assistantships, get into good doctoral programs, and/or finish their degrees. Since these goals are paramount to any graduate student, it is obvious that the trade off is not a good one.

Since decreasing study time seems to be a bad idea, it would seem that GFA's should cut down on their time spent with forensics. However this solution also has problems. Many GFA's feel tremendous pressure to field a winning program. Some of this pressure is self-imposed--most forensic coaches are very competitive people. Also, Directors of Forensic programs (DOF's) pressure GFA's to produce winning students. Finally, Department Chairs, Deans, and University Presidents also want their forensic programs to be competitive. Many budgets are determined by CEDA points, NIET Qualifiers, and other measures of competitive success. In addition to these pressures, many GFA's are

competing for jobs, and prospective employers often look at past success or past reputation when hiring DOF's.

As a result of the negative implications associated with cutting back on either scholarship or coaching, many students devote many hours to both, which eliminates time spent with friends, family, and hobbies. Consequently, I believe that many GFA's burnout before they even acquire their first full-time coaching position. Some may believe that the long hours required for success acts as sort of a "natural selection"; only the "strong" (or most qualified) go on to become full time coaches. However, I believe that taking such a stance is short-sighted. Last weekend at a tournament at the University of Oregon I met with twenty other coaches to discuss the formation of a coaches' "guild" designed to provide support to forensic educators. At that time I was informed that many programs at both the high school and collegiate level were lacking qualified coaches, and thus in danger of losing their program. The cause of this shortage can partly be attributed to experienced coaches leaving the activity, but I think that many graduate students are avoiding even entering the profession because of the problems they encountered while still obtaining their degree. Many excellent coaches are being lost because as graduate students these coaches were discouraged from becoming full time coaches as a result of the same conditions that drive experienced coaches out of the activity.

## Possible Solutions

There are many possible solutions to the problems graduate students face in trying to balance the demands of forensic coaching and graduate study. My first two ideas would also help deal with the problem of experienced coaches burning out.

First, I believe that the competitive season must be shortened. Forensic educators spend more time in-season than any other coach. The Fall CEDA topic is released in the beginning of September, and CEDA Nationals occurs in the beginning of April, with the Individual Event's National Tournaments coming even later. That means that most coaches, including GFA's, are in-season for about eight months. Vacations are unheard of since many important tournaments occur during Winter and Spring Breaks. One or two months should be chopped off the competitive calendar to give GFA's a chance to recover and get to know his/her families again.

Second, tournament schedules should be more humane. Seven-thirty a.m. extemp. draws and Eight p.m. debate rounds should be eliminated. Lunch breaks should be worked into the schedule. I know this is a common lament, but something must be done to make tournaments less exhausting. Two day tournaments would be preferable. When a tournament ends Sunday night and a GFA has to be in class Monday morning, his/her performance is obviously going to suffer.

Graduate Assistants should be able to find time to teach and study in addition to coaching forensics. In terms of teaching,

the situation is a double-edged sword. If a GFA is required to teach during the forensic season many more hours of work are heaped upon the large time commitment already in effect. But if a GFA doesn't teach, he/she is missing out on valuable classroom experience. A way of dealing with this would be to give a GFA a quarters release time from Forensics each year (since some programs require GFA's to continue working on Forensics in the Spring). Also, GFA's could be given half-time appointments so he/she could teach half-time also. This situation would be preferable to the "double-time" experienced now. Additionally, by hiring enough GFA's that the coaching work load can be divided, students will be able to find more time to study and produce quality scholarship. Having weekends off is especially critical, since the largest amounts of writing time are often during the weekends.

Another important step would be made if Faculty were to recognize and appreciate the amount of work and the value of the efforts put forth by GFA's. Many coaches are denied tenure when working as Forensic educators because the time commitments are so great that publishing becomes virtually impossible. The situation is similar for GFA's. A graduate student who is spending 15-20 hours a week as a TA can produce much more work than a GFA who is spending 60-70 hours a week. This time discrepancy should be noted by Graduate Faculty members during annual reviews of graduate student performance. This should not excuse GFA's from producing outside scholarship, but allowances

should be made to account for the limited free time available to GFA's.

Finally, I believe that departments should not put GFA's in a position where they are expected to produce mediocre students. When GFA's are told to spend no more than their allotted time (usually 20 hours per week) on forensics, departments are sending a message that mediocrity is acceptable. Departments should instead encourage GFA's to do the best job possible, and recognize the trade-offs inherent when producing a full effort. Students participating in forensics have a right to expect a complete effort from their coaches, just as students expect their classroom teachers to work hard when acting as instructors.

## Conclusion

The values of forensics have been well documented. These values are only possible, however, when qualified forensic educators are available to direct and educate students. These coaches are trained while in graduate school, and the activity is not well served if GFA's are burned out before they even enter the ranks of full-time coaches. GFA's should expect to spend large amounts of time helping students learn the skills necessary to compete, but not at the expense of his/her graduate studies. GFA's should also have the time to learn to be good classroom teachers and sound scholars. The future of forensics is based upon the skills of today's GFA's, and the activity cannot survive if new coaches are not encouraged to remain active in the forensic community.